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SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN MILITIAS IN NINEWA PLAINS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Cameron Munter, PRT Leader, Provincial
Reconstruction Team Ninewa, State.
REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) Christian religious and provincial government officials report Christian militias are operating in minority areas east of Mosul ("Ninewa Plains"). According to Dr. Lalo, assistant governor for the province, Christian forces in Ninewa Plains number approximately 1,250 and are personally being funded by the Minister of Finance from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The presence of Christian militias raises questions about Kurdish influence in the province, especially in minority communities, possible complicity by the provincial government and KRG officials to allow the militias, and the potential failure of legitimate government security forces with recruiting, funding, and gaining the confidence of Ninewa's minority residents. End Summary and Comment.

MILITIAS: ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS

¶2. (C) Father Aimen Paulus (known as "Father Aimen"), Rector of St. George's Catholic Church (Assyrian Catholic) in Bartallah, told PRT on May 27 that Christian communities in eastern Ninewa ("Ninewa Plains") had established a guard force for self-protection. Dr. Lalo, Assistant Governor for Administration for Ninewa Province, commanded them, claimed Aimen. On May 30, PRT spoke to Lalo for clarification. Lalo more than graciously offered his perspective, but clarified that the forces were "not a militia" since the guards were authorized by Ninewa Governor Duraid Kashmoula. Lalo went on to say the guards had no political role and were "absolutely necessary" for the protection of Christians in the area. He said they numbered approximately 1,250 total, with 700 in Qaraqash, 350 in Bartallah, and 200 in Karamlash. There was no formal headquarters or leadership, said Lalo, but he himself was appointed leader over the militia by the authority of the governor. Weapons permits were issued through the provincial government, and the guards were required to wear civilian clothes. The role of the force was to protect Christian districts and churches by searching, detaining and turning armed non-residents over to local police.

¶3. (C) Lalo said the guards had strict rules of engagement, however. Deadly force was not permitted. They could only carry AK-47 assault rifles, not pistols, heavy weapons, or mortars, he said. Lalo claimed most guards were volunteers that held normal jobs. Many worked at least two days at regular jobs, then one day as a guard. A few, on the other hand, were paid professional guards, claimed Lalo. Most have training from previous military or police experience, he said, and ex-Iraqi Army officers provided regular refresher training. The principal financial supporter was KRG Minister of Finance Sarkese Aghjian, a Christian Kurd. Lalo noted that funding came from Aghjian's personal coffers, and not from the KRG. Local churches provided limited financial support, he said, and the guards themselves often paid for their own equipment and ammunition. Membership was limited to Christians, however, as no other religious groups could join the force, he said.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) The Christian guard force appears to be the principal security service in the Christian areas surpassing the police in numbers and authority: compared to the 1,250 or so guards, there are no more than 200 Iraqi Police (IP) in the area, Lalo claimed. According to Lalo, the IP look to the Christian guards to secure the area, and apparently act as a backup to the guard force. During our visit to Bartallah to meet with Aimen we stopped and took pictures of some of the "Bartallah Guards," as they were identified on their badges (which were written in both English and Arabic). The guards we spoke to were indeed wearing civilian clothes and carrying AK-47s.

¶5. (C) The mere presence of Christian militias in Ninewa Plains raises very real concerns. It indicates the determination of local residents to protect themselves by any means necessary; the failure of provincial police and military officials to build

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the confidence of their constituents outside of Mosul; and the possibility of the provincial government's complicity with Kurdish officials from Iraqi Kurdistan to support militias in Ninewa. Aimen claims the guards are not being trained or commanded by Peshmerga, but it remains unknown how closely aligned the forces are to the KRG. To us, allegations that a single individual is supporting such a large force alone do not seem credible. Furthermore, if allegations the militias are being funded by the KRG are true we wonder about the ramifications of further Kurdish encroachment in Ninewa Plains and what that means to the future of legitimate security efforts, as well as questions of which government entity -- the GOI or KRG -- will ultimately control the area.
MUNTER